

VU Research Portal

Conversion as Convergence: Gregory the Great Confronting Pagan and Jewish Influences in Anglo-Saxon Christianity

Adan Jones, Miriam

published in

Pagans and Christians in the Late Roman Empire
2017

[Link to publication in VU Research Portal](#)

citation for published version (APA)

Adan Jones, M. (2017). Conversion as Convergence: Gregory the Great Confronting Pagan and Jewish Influences in Anglo-Saxon Christianity. In M. S  ghy, & E. Schoolman (Eds.), *Pagans and Christians in the Late Roman Empire: New Evidence, New Approaches (4th-8th Centuries)* (pp. 151-163). (CEU Medievalia; Vol. 18). CEU Press.

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal ?

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

E-mail address:

vuresearchportal.ub@vu.nl

CEU MEDIEVALIA 18

Series Editor: József Laszlovszky

Pagans and Christians
in the
Late Roman Empire

New Evidence, New Approaches (4th–8th centuries)



Edited by
Marianne Sághy and Edward M. Schoolman

CEU Department of Medieval Studies
&
Central European University Press
Budapest · New York
&
University of Pécs
Specimina Nova Supplementum X

Budapest, 2017

CONVERSION AS CONVERGENCE:
GREGORY THE GREAT CONFRONTING PAGAN AND JEWISH
INFLUENCES IN ANGLO-SAXON CHRISTIANITY

Miriam Adan Jones

In a famous letter written in July 601, Gregory the Great offers two pieces of advice to the party of Roman missionaries working in Anglo-Saxon England, regarding how they are to deal with the pagan past of their (prospective) converts. First, with regard to places of worship, Gregory proposes that pagan temples ought to be rid of their idols and consecrated as churches; second, with regard to religious celebration, that the pagan custom of ritual slaughter and feasting should be retained with certain adjustments.¹ Particularly striking is the advice to include in the festivities the building of huts (*tabernacula*), from the boughs of trees, in which the worshipers may sojourn while feasting at the site of their converted church.² Far from being a concession to English pagan usage, this seems to have been inspired by the Jewish festival of *Sukkot*, the feast of tabernacles, as described in the Old Testament and practiced by early-medieval Jews.³

Gregory's letter, addressed to Abbot Mellitus and meant to be relayed by him to the missionaries, goes on to argue that the Anglo-Saxons will be more receptive to Christianity if the change is incremental: "For there is no doubt that it is impossible to cut away everything at the same time from hardened minds, because anyone who strives

¹ *S. Gregorii Magni Registrum epistularum*, ed. Dag Ludvig Norberg, 2 vols, Corpus Christianorum Series Latina (hereafter CCL) 140, 140A (Turnhout: Brepols, 1982), XI.56 (hereafter *Reg. ep.*).

² It is not clear whether Gregory's advice was ever put into practice. David Wilson, *Anglo-Saxon Paganism* (London; New York: Routledge, 1992), 29–43, finds no indication in the literature that pagan sites of worship were converted into churches. Flora Spiegel, "The *tabernacula* of Gregory the Great and the Conversion of Anglo-Saxon England," *Anglo-Saxon England* 36 (November 14, 2007): 6–10 (hereafter Spiegel, "The *tabernacula*"), on the other hand, offers archaeological and literary evidence that Gregory's instructions to construct *tabernacula* may have been carried out in at least some cases.

³ Spiegel, "The *tabernacula*," 4–5.

to ascend to the highest place, relies on ladders or steps. He is not lifted up in one leap."⁴ But in other letters Gregory's attitude is markedly different: "hunt down the worship of idols, and overturn the building of temples" (*Idolorum cultus insequere, fanorum aedificia euerte*), he writes to King Æthelbert of Kent only a few weeks earlier.⁵ This harsher approach accords better with what we know of Gregory's missionary strategy in other regions: where paganism is found in Sicily, Sardinia, and Francia, we find him encouraging bishops and aristocrats alike to repress it forcefully.⁶ There is also support for the use of force to aid Christianization in Gregory's theological works: in his *Moralia*, Gregory compares the power wielded by temporal rulers to the strength of the rhinoceros—just as the rhinoceros breaks up the earth enabling it to be cultivated, the Christian ruler crushes the wicked and allows the church to flourish.⁷ This makes Gregory's leniency towards English paganism in his letter to Mellitus surprising.

Surprising also is his deliberate importation of a Jewish custom into the English context. Not only because there was no precedent for such an appropriation, but because Gregory would normally balk at the idea of Christians applying the letter of the Law to themselves in such a manner. His preference for a spiritual understanding of the Hebrew scriptures expresses itself throughout his exegetical works. An extended argument for the spiritual reading of the Old Testament opens his commentary on the Song of Songs. To heed only the literal sense, he writes, is like noticing only the colors

⁴ "Nam duris mentibus simul omnia abscondere impossibile esse non dubium est, quia is qui summum locum ascendere nititur gradibus uel passibus, non autem saltibus eleuatur." *Reg. ep.*, XI.56; John R.C. Martyn, trans., *The Letters of Gregory the Great*, Mediaeval Sources in Translation 40 (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2004), 803 (hereafter Martyn, *Letters*).

⁵ *Reg. ep.* XI.37; Martyn, *Letters*, 783; George Demacopoulos, "Gregory the Great and the Pagan Shrines of Kent," *Journal of Late Antiquity* 1, no. 2 (2008): 353–69 (hereafter Demacopoulos, "Gregory and the Pagan Shrines"), suggests Gregory's letter to Æthelbert should not be read as literally instructing the king to oversee the destruction of pagan shrines. Its focus, he reasons, is on the king's spiritual formation, rather than on his people's conversion, and this document therefore cannot be read as a programmatic statement of Gregory's wishes for the Anglo-Saxon mission. I remain unconvinced that Gregory never meant his instructions in this letter to be followed.

⁶ Maymó i Capdevila, "Gregory the Great and Religious Otherness: Pagans in a Christian Italy," *Studia Patristica* 48 (2010): 328–330 (hereafter Capdevila, "Gregory and Religious Otherness"); Robert A. Markus, "Gregory the Great and a Papal Missionary Strategy," in *The Mission of the Church and the Propagation of the Faith: Papers Read at the Seventh Summer Meeting and the Eighth Winter Meeting of the Ecclesiastical History Society*, ed. G.J. Cuming, Studies in Church History 6 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 31–32 (hereafter Markus, "Papal Missionary Strategy").

⁷ *S. Gregorii Magni Moralia in Job*, ed. Marcus Adriaen, 3 vols., Corpus Christianorum Series Latina 143, 143A, 143B (Turnhout: Brepols, 1979), xxxi, 4–7 (hereafter *Moralia*); David Hipshon, "Gregory the Great's Political Thought," *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 53, no. 3 (2002): 441; Carole E. Straw, "Gregory's Politics: Theory and Practice," in *Gregorio Magno E Il Suo Tempo. XIX Incontro di studiosi dell'antichità cristiana in collaborazione con l'École Française de Rome, Roma, 9–12 Maggio 1990*, vol. 1 (Rome: Institutum Patristicum "Augustinianum," 1991), 56–57.

of a painting and paying no attention to the objects it depicts. Changing the metaphor, he compares the literal sense to the husk in which the kernel of the spiritual sense is hidden; to approach the text only in a literal way is to eat the husks as animals do.⁸ Turning from his exegesis to his correspondence, we find Gregory working to "prevent encroachments of Jews and Judaism on Christianity" and "respond[ing] vehemently to reports of Judaizing among Christians."⁹ In several letters he renounces Jewish ownership of Christian slaves, because this situation provides "opportunity for simple souls to be slaves [...] to the Jewish superstition" (*occasionem, ut superstitioni iudaicae simplices animae [...] deseruirent*).¹⁰ In a letter to the citizens of Rome, Gregory objects to Christians observing the Sabbath, a practice he connects to the coming of the antichrist who "compels the people to live like Jews [...] so that he may recall the external rite of the law and subject the perfidy of the Jews to himself" (*iudaizare populum compellit, ut exteriorem ritum legis reuocet et sibi iudaeorum perfidiam subdat*).¹¹ Gregory impresses upon his addressees that "after the appearance of the grace of almighty God, our Lord Jesus Christ, the precepts of the law that were said figuratively could not be observed to the letter" (*postquam gratia omnipotentis dei domini nostri iesu christi apparuit, praecepta legis, quae per figuram dicta sunt, iuxta litteram seruari non possunt*).¹²

Given that in his other writing Gregory tends to resist pagan and Jewish influences on the Christian church, his suggestion in his letter to Mellitus, that a space be created for such influences within the life of the new English church, requires explanation.

July 601: A Turning Point

Scholars have sought that explanation in the context of the letter. Dated 18 July 601, it is Gregory's latest surviving statement on the English mission. That mission had been underway for several years by the time the letter was written; the missionary

⁸ *Sancti Gregorii Magni Expositiones in canticum canticorum in librum primum regum*, ed. Patrick Verbraken, CC SL 144 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1963), §4 (hereafter *In canticum canticorum*). On Gregory's exegetical method, see Stephan C. Kessler, "Gregor der Grosse und seine Theorie der Exegese: Die Epistula ad Leandrum," in *L'esegesi dei padri latini: Dalle origini a Gregorio Magno: XXVIII Incontro di studiosi dell'antichità cristiana*, vol. 2, *Studia Ephemeridis "Augustinianum"* 68 (Rome: Institutum Patristicum Augustinianum, 2000), 691–700; Stephan C. Kessler, "Gregory the Great: A Figure of Tradition and Transition in Church Exegesis," in *Hebrew Bible, Old Testament: The History of Its Interpretation: Volume 1: From the Beginnings to the Middle Ages (Until 1300), Part 2: The Middle Ages*, ed. Magne Sæbø (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1996), 135–47; Robert A. Markus, *Signs and Meanings: World and Text in Ancient Christianity* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1996), 48–51 (Markus, *Signs and Meanings*).

⁹ Jeremy Cohen, *Living Letters of the Law: Ideas of the Jew in Medieval Christianity* (University of California Press, 1999), 78 (hereafter Cohen, *Living Letters*).

¹⁰ *Reg. ep.*, IV.21; Martyn, *Letters*, 303.

¹¹ *Reg. ep.*, XIII.1; Martyn, *Letters*, 822.

¹² *Reg. ep.*, XIII.1; Martyn, *Letters*, 822.

Augustine and his party had arrived in Kent and been welcomed there by King Æthelbert and Queen Bertha in 597. In the spring of 601, the priest Laurence and monk Peter returned to Rome from the mission field with news, and Gregory sent them on their way again in June, after what appears to have been a short stay of only a few weeks.¹³ They departed with a second party of missionaries under the leadership of Abbot Mellitus. This party carried, among other things, a *pallium* for Augustine, instructions for the organization of two archdioceses in Britain, and letters to Æthelbert and Bertha, praising their reception of the first mission party and exhorting them to continue Christianizing their subjects.¹⁴ These letters are dated 22 June. The letter to Mellitus, which strikes such a discordant note with Gregory's policy until then, follows less than a month later, while Mellitus is still "in Francia" (*in franciis*). Robert Markus and others have seen it as a belated response to Gregory's receipt of news from the mission field: once the flurry of activity involved in sending off the new missionary party had passed, Gregory had the chance to reconsider the information he had received from Peter and Laurence, and came to realize its implications for his missionary approach.¹⁵ The insight gained by Gregory tends to be envisioned as political in nature: the authority of the papacy in Anglo-Saxon England was somewhat less, and the court of Æthelbert somewhat more reluctant, than anticipated. Since Gregory was unable to gain the necessary support from the local aristocracy, it is argued, he was unable to use his preferred coercive methods, and had to advocate a milder strategy.¹⁶

But does Gregory's advice to Mellitus really represent the abandonment of his usual principles for the sake of expediency?¹⁷ Gregory was not only an administrator, but

¹³ Markus, "Papal Missionary Strategy," 33.

¹⁴ To Bertha: XI.35, to Æthelbert: XI.37, to Augustine: XI.36 and XI.39. Letters were sent at the same time to several bishops the missionaries would encounter on their way through Gaul (XI.34, XI.38, XI.40, XI.41, XI.42 and XI.45), Kings Theoderic (XI.47), Theodebert (XI.50), and Clothar (XI.51) and Queen Brunichild (XI.48).

¹⁵ Markus, "Papal Missionary Strategy," 35–36; Robert A. Markus, "Augustine and Gregory the Great," in *St Augustine and the Conversion of England* (Stroud: Sutton, 1999), 47; Ian Wood, "The Mission of Augustine of Canterbury to the English," *Speculum* 69, no. 1 (1994): 12 (hereafter Wood, "Mission of Augustine"); Fabrizio Conti, "Gregorio Magno e gli Anglosassoni. Considerazioni sullo sviluppo di una strategia missionaria," *Studi romani: Rivista trimestrale dell'Istituto di studi romani* 53, no. 3–4 (2005): 479–480 (hereafter Conti, "Gregorio Magno e gli Anglosassoni").

¹⁶ Robert A. Markus, "Gregory the Great's Pagans," in *Belief and Culture in the Middle Ages: Studies Presented to Henry Mayr-Harting*, ed. Richard Gameson and Henrietta Leyser (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 31–32; Capdevila, "Gregory and Religious Otherness," 331; Spiegel, "The tabernacula," 12.

¹⁷ Clare Stancliffe, "Kings and Conversion: Some Comparisons between the Roman Mission to England and Patrick's to Ireland," *Frühmittelalterliche Studien* 14 (1980): 60 n.12, points in a helpful direction by noting that Gregory often pairs "two apparently contradictory approaches" because to him they are not contradictory, but complementary. The two letters do not represent a complete change of mind, but rather a shifting of focus. Conti, "Gregorio Magno e gli Anglosassoni," 476–477 makes a similar point.

also a theologian with a deep concern for harmony between faith and action.¹⁸ In order to properly understand Gregory's mildness in the letter to Mellitus and its motivations, we must therefore consider his missionary strategy in Anglo-Saxon England against the backdrop of his general understanding of conversion and spiritual formation.¹⁹

Gregory's Theology of Spiritual Progress

Gregory's views on conversion and spiritual progress are intimately tied to his ideas about human nature and the processes by which God draws human beings to himself. His missionary strategy and pastoral approaches are informed by the dealings of God with mankind from the beginning of the world to its end, as described in the Old and New Testaments. Gregory's understanding of the human condition begins with the fall of Adam and the expulsion of man from Paradise. Ever since, humanity has been blind, cold, and lost. It chases after empty philosophies, false gods, and material goods.²⁰ But divine grace seeks humanity out, meeting human beings where they are, condescending to speak to them in the terms of their limited and wayward hearts and minds:

Divine speech is communicated to the cold and numb soul by means of enigmas and in a hidden manner instills in her the love she does not know by means of what she knows. Allegory provides the soul set far below God with a kind of crane whereby she may be lifted to God. If enigmas are placed between God and the soul, when the soul recognizes something of her own in the language of the enigmas, through the meaning of this language she understands something that is not her own and by means of earthly languages hopes for eternal things.²¹

¹⁸ Carole E. Straw, *Gregory the Great: Perfection in Imperfection*, Transformations of the Classical Heritage 14 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 49–50; Mirjam Schambeck, "Actio und Contemplatio - Überlegungen zu einem Modell bei Gregor dem Großen," *Wissenschaft und Weisheit* 62, no. 1 (1999): 44–46.

¹⁹ Demacopoulos, "Gregory and the Pagan Shrines" presents Gregory's English correspondence against the backdrop of the *Regula Pastoralis*. That the English mission should not be seen apart from Gregory's work as a theologian is also noted by Claude Dagens, *Saint Grégoire le Grand: culture et expérience chrétiennes* (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1977), 311 (hereafter: Dagens, Saint Grégoire).

²⁰ *In canticum canticorum*, §1; *Homiliae in Evangelia*, ed. Raymond Étaix (Turnhout: Brepols, 1999), I.2.1 (hereafter *Homiliae in Evangelia*); *Moralia* V.34, VIII.30, IX.33.

²¹ "Ideirco per quaedam enigmata sermo divinus animae terpeni et frigidae loquitur et de rebus, quas novit, latenter insinuat ei amorem, quem non novit. Allegoria enim animae longe a deo positae quasi quandam machinam facit, ut per ilam levetur ad deum. Interpositis quippe enigmatibus, dum quiddam in verbis cognoscit, quod suum est, in sensu verborum intellegit, quod non est suum, et per terrena verba separatur a terra." *In canticum canticorum*, §1-2; Mark DelCogliano, trans., *Gregory the Great on the Song of Songs*, Cistercian Studies Series 244 (Liturgical Press, 2012), 109.

Thus by God's speaking the covenant people of Israel is formed, and the books of the Old Testament are written. Jews live by a greater light than pagans: they worship the true God, listening to his words. But their knowledge of God is still limited, the bliss and intimacy of Paradise are not yet regained. Though they have the words of Scripture as their guide, they remain blind to the spiritual meaning of the text, which for Gregory points to Christ.²² For with the coming of Christ into the world, the union of God with humanity is achieved. Now a direct knowledge of God becomes possible, and the church progresses with confidence towards the perfection that is its eschatological hope.²³ The spiritual history of the world can thus be divided into three stages: paganism, Judaism, Christianity. And this succession is not accidental, but reflects the gradual increase of revelation as divinely ordained. The whole of history leads up to the perfect union of God and man, and each step of the journey is undertaken with this goal in mind.

This movement of humanity as a whole is mirrored in each person's ascent from carnal to contemplative life, a process described over and over again in Gregory's works. He uses many metaphors to describe its stages, for instance the church as a house into which individuals enter, progressing through the rooms one by one as they master the virtues of faith, hope and love, or devotion as movement, with those who do not believe standing still, while immature believers walk, the mature run, and the perfect sprint following Christ.²⁴ The boundaries between these categories are not hard and fast. It is often very difficult to tell just to whom Gregory is referring, as the images are constantly changing, the numbers of categories ranging from two (perfect/imperfect; elect/reprobate; spiritual/carnal), through threes and fours, to nine in one homily.²⁵

²² Gregory believes the problem with Judaism is a failure to progress from the level of the letter to the spirit and to recognize the fulfillment of the Old Testament in Christ. Although he wants contemporary Jews to be allowed to practice their religion in peace, he continues to hope for and work towards their conversion to Christianity. Cohen, *Living Letters*, 73–94; Darius Oliha Makuja, "Gregory the Great, Roman Law and the Jews: Seeking 'True' Conversions," *Sacris Erudiri* 48 (2009): 52–61, 70–72; G. R. Evans, *The Thought of Gregory the Great* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 135–138. See also Jean Stern, "Israël et l'église dans l'exégèse de saint Grégoire le Grand," in *L'esegesi dei padri latini: Dalle origini a Gregorio Magno: XXVIII Incontro di studiosi dell'antichità cristiana*, vol. 2, *Studia Ephemeridis "Augustinianum"* 68 (Rome: Institutum Patristicum Augustinianum, 2000), 676–89.

²³ Michael Fiedrowicz, *Das Kirchenverständnis Gregors des Grossen: eine Untersuchung seiner exegetischen und homiletischen Werke*, *Römische Quartalschrift für christliche Altertumskunde und Kirchengeschichte*, Supplementheft 50 (Freiburg: Herder, 1995), Chapters 4 and 9 (hereafter Fiedrowicz, *Das Kirchenverständnis Gregors des Grossen*).

²⁴ *In canticum canticorum*, §25–26.

²⁵ *Homiliae in Evangelia*, II.34.11; Bruno Judic, "Hiérarchie angélique et hiérarchie ecclésiale chez Grégoire le Grand," in *Hiérarchie et stratification sociale dans l'Occident médiéval (400–1100)*, ed. François Bougard, Dominique Iogna-Prat, and Régine Le Jan, *Collection haut Moyen Âge* 6 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2008), 41–43.

Gregory's main concern is not exactly where a person is on that great continuum between perdition and perfection, but that he should be making constant progress. To this end, both discipline and teaching must be tailored to fit the needs of the situation.²⁶

Now the preacher should realise that he must not overtax the mind of his hearer, lest, so to speak, the string of the soul be strained too much and snap. ... Wherefore, Paul says: *I could not speak to you as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal. As unto little ones in Christ, I gave you milk to drink, not meat.* ... So, the true preacher proclaims aloud plain truths to hearts still in the dark, showing them no hidden mysteries. Then only are they to learn all the profounder things of Heaven, when they approach the light of truth.²⁷

We can take three points from this that are helpful to the present discussion. First, the ascent of humanity to divinity is made possible and initiated by the descent of divinity to humanity.²⁸ God condescends to those he seeks to convert. Secondly, change for Gregory is incremental, so much so that the transition from one stage to the next is often not clearly defined, and it is not always easy to determine where a person sits on the spectrum of spiritual states. And finally, spiritual development and growth are proper to everyone. Not only the heathen must be converted, but the Christian, too, must ever be converted anew.²⁹

²⁶ Paul Meyvaert, "Diversity in Unity, A Gregorian Theme," *Heythrop Journal* 4, no. 1 (1963): 148.

²⁷ "Sciendum uero praedicatori est, ut auditoris sui animum ultra uires non trahat, ne, ut ita dicam, dum plus quam ualet tenditur, mentis chorda rumpatur. ... Hinc paulus ait: non potui uobis loqui quasi spiritalibus, sed quasi carnalibus. Tamquam paruulis in christo lac uobis potum dedi, non escam. ... qui recte praedicat, obscuris adhuc cordibus aperta clamat, nil de occultis mysteriis indicat, ut tunc subtiliora quaeque de caelestibus audiant, cum luci ueritatis appropinquant." *Regula Pastoralis*, ed. Floribert Rommel, *Library of Latin Texts* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2010), clt.brepols.net/llta, III.39; Henry Davis, trans., *Pastoral Care*, *Ancient Christian Writers* 11 (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 231–232.

²⁸ Sandra Zimdars-Swartz, "A Confluence of Imagery: Exegesis and Christology according to Gregory the Great," in *Grégoire le Grand: Chantilly, Centre culturel Les Fontaines, 15–19 septembre 1982: actes*, ed. Jacques Fontaine, Robert Gillet, and Stan Pellistrandi (Paris: Editions du Centre national de la recherche scientifique, 1986), 329; Rodrigue Bélanger, "Anthropologie et parole de Dieu dans le commentaire de Grégoire le Grand sur le Cantique des cantiques," in *Grégoire le Grand: Chantilly, Centre culturel Les Fontaines, 15–19 septembre 1982: actes* (Paris: Editions du Centre national de la recherche scientifique, 1986), 248.

²⁹ Katharina Greschat, *Die Moralia in Job Gregors des Grossen: ein christologisch-ekklesiologischer Kommentar*, *Studien und Texte zu Antike und Christentum* 31 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 243; Dagens, *Saint Grégoire*, 263; Markus, *Signs and Meanings*, 47.

The Gradual Progress of the English

Against this theoretical backdrop, Gregory's comment about the conversion of the English, that progress is made step by step, not by leaps and bounds, makes perfect sense. The ideas of incremental growth and tailored pastoral care are everywhere in Gregory's work, and find their outworking here, too.

The preservation of certain elements of the pagan religion of the Anglo-Saxons becomes for Gregory a way of helping them ascend the ladder to the knowledge and love of Christ one rung at a time. Beginning from complete ignorance of God, the next rung of the ladder for the Anglo-Saxons is one associated in Gregory's mind with a "Jewish" kind of faith: one in which God becomes known as the Lawgiver deserving of obedience and worship, but is not yet known as beloved Savior. Perhaps this explains his appropriation of a Jewish festival in order to begin to steer the Anglo-Saxons from their pagan feasts towards Christian worship: Gregory is seeking in his dealings with the Anglo-Saxons to emulate God's dealings with humanity, leading them to Christ by way of the Old Testament.³⁰ He makes the comparison between the English and the Israelites explicit in the letter to Mellitus, pointing to biblical precedent for the appropriation and reinterpretation of pagan sacrifices: "Even so, the Lord certainly made himself known to the people of Israel in Egypt, and yet he kept their use of sacrifices, which they used to offer to the devil in worshipping him, for their own sacrifice" (*Sic israelitico populo in aegypto dominus se quidem innotuit, sed tamen eis sacrificiorum usus, quae diabolo solebat exhibere, in cultu proprio reseruauit*).³¹

But it is never Gregory's intention that the spiritual development of the English should be arrested at this level. In the individual, certain vices can be tolerated for a time to facilitate the correction of others, but in the end all vice must be eradicated.³² Just so, Gregory's hope for the English church is that it will progress towards and ultimately attain the perfection towards which the whole church, indeed all of humanity, strains. He is therefore careful to give what pagan and Jewish elements he allows a Christian interpretation. The slaughter of oxen is to take place "on the day of a dedication, or on the birthdays of holy martyrs" (*die dedicationis uel natalicii sanctorum martyrum*) and is to be done "in praise of God" (*ad laudem dei*). Like the ancient Israelites, they are to offer their sacrifices with "changed hearts" (*cor mutantes*), doing so "for the true God and not for the idols" (*uero deo et non idolis*) so that "they would no longer be the same sacrifices" (*iam sacrificia ipsa non essent*).³³

³⁰ Dagens, *Saint Grégoire*, 263; Spiegel, "The tabernacula," 5–6.

³¹ *Reg. ep.*, XI.56; Martyn, *Letters*, 803.

³² *Regula Pastoralis*, III.38.

³³ *Reg. ep.*, XI.56; Martyn, *Letters*, 803.

Although he thus shows himself open to incorporating elements of non-Christian festival gatherings into the life of the newly formed English church, Gregory makes it clear that he does so by way of concession and that the ultimate goal is precisely not for the English to remain attached to the exteriors of their rituals, but to use them as a way of accessing interior and spiritual truths: "Thus, while some joys are reserved for them externally, they might more readily consent to internal joys" (*ut, dum eis aliqua exterius gaudia reseruauerunt, ad interiora gaudia consentire facilius ualeant*).³⁴

The Threat of Regress

But if this incremental approach to missions fits so comfortably with Gregory's theology, what are we to make of his earlier admonitions to forcefully stamp out pagan worship? What can explain his earlier admonishment to King Æthelbert to "hasten to extend the Christian faith among the races subject to you, ... by terrifying them" (*christianam fidem in populis tibi subditis extendere festina ... terrendo*) and to destroy the temple buildings used in the worship of idols?³⁵

Perhaps these admonitions can best be understood as a reaction against backsliding.³⁶ The very dynamism in Gregory's anthropology that makes spiritual progress possible also opens up the possibility of regress, and Gregory is well aware that some begin to live the Christian life but then stumble and fall to temptation.³⁷ This is what Gregory fears most for the newly converted English, for to convert to Christianity and then return to Judaism or paganism is even worse than not converting at all.³⁸ All around him, Gregory sees civilization crumbling; he lives, so he puts it himself, in a barbaric time, which he believed to be the old age of the world.³⁹ Christ's return and the

³⁴ *Reg. ep.*, XI.56; Martyn, *Letters*, 803.

³⁵ *Reg. ep.*, XI.37; Martyn, *Letters*, 783.

³⁶ Cf. Conti, "Gregorio Magno e gli Anglosassoni," 470: "la distruzione degli idoli va legata, in ultima analisi, al proposito di dissuadere coloro che avessero già respinto il paganesimo dal riabbracciarlo nuovamente."

³⁷ *Moralia*, XIX.27.50 and XII.52.59 indicate that some convert but make no progress and some convert but soon fall back to their old ways. *Homiliae in Evangelia*, II.38.15 gives a specific example of three sisters, two of whom progress in love for God but one of whom sees her love fade over time and eventually returns to the love of the world. Cited in Dagens, *Saint Grégoire*, 264–265.

³⁸ "Dum enim quispiam ad baptismatis fontem [...] peruenerit, ad pristinam superstitionem remeans inde deterius moritur," *Reg. ep.*, I.45. Likewise, to begin to be converted to Christ and then remain stagnant will ultimately lead to regress. Faith and baptism are sufficient to grant entry to the church, but only those who go on to add the chief virtue of charity to their faith will be allowed to remain inside. *Homiliae in Evangelia*, II.38; Fiedrowicz, *Das Kirchenverständnis Gregors des Grossen*, 289–90.

³⁹ *Homiliae in Evangelia*, I.17.14; Robert A. Markus, *Gregory the Great and His World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 51–54.

final judgment could not be far. It was therefore of the essence that those who had once embraced Christ not grow lax and revert to godless ways.

Until June 601, Gregory seems to have believed that the English were already swiftly advancing in their spiritual journey. Already in his commentary on Job, written before the first departure of his missionaries, he makes mention of recent conversions in England: "see, the tongue of Britain, which knew nothing but barbarous gnashing, has now begun to resound in divine praise with the Hebrew 'alleluia' (*ecce lingua britannie, quae nihil aliud nouerat, quam barbarum frendere, iam dudum in diuinis laudibus hebraeum coepit alleluia resonare*).⁴⁰ He thus seems to have thought, when he sent Augustine and his companions on their way, that there was already a significant Christian presence in England.⁴¹ To what extent British Christianity survived the *adventus Saxonum* remains a subject of scholarly debate, but it is likely that Gregory was not wrong to expect the English to have some familiarity with Christianity already.⁴² Bertha herself was a Christian, and had brought a bishop with her from Francia upon her marriage to Æthelbert, which may indicate a Frankish interest in converting the English.⁴³ By the time Gregory sent Augustine forth in the summer of 596, he had heard that the English were eager for conversion and had asked "priests from the vicinity" (*sacerdotes e vicinio*) to preach to them, but had been rebuffed.⁴⁴ He therefore had every reason to expect Augustine's mission to be a swift success, and indeed the first reports appeared to confirm this expectation. In July of 598, he wrote to Eulogius of Alexandria that

... now letters have already reached us about [Augustine's] safety and work, stating that either he, or those who crossed over with him, are ablaze with such great miracles among that same race [of the English], that they seem to be imitating the virtues of the apostles with the proofs they provide. And in the solemnity of our Lord's nativity, which

⁴⁰ *Moralia*, XXVII.11.

⁴¹ Spiegel, "The *tabernacula*," 3 n.4; Clare Stancliffe, "The British Church and the Mission of Augustine," in *St Augustine and the Conversion of England*, ed. Richard Gameson (Stroud: Sutton, 1999), 111–113.

⁴² On the presence of Christianity in Anglo-Saxon England before the Augustinian mission, see Jane Stevenson, "Christianity in Sixth- and Seventh-Century Southumbria," in *The Age of Sutton Hoo: The Seventh Century in North-Western Europe*, ed. Martin Carver (Boydell Press, 1992), 175–83; Rob Meens, "A Background to Augustine's Mission to Anglo-Saxon England," *Anglo-Saxon England* 23 (1994): 5–17. Ian Wood goes so far as to suggest that "Anglo-Saxon paganism was modelled in part on Christianity" in his "Some Historical Re-Identifications and the Christianization of Kent," in *Christianizing Peoples and Converting Individuals*, International Medieval Research 7 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2000), 30.

⁴³ Liudhard's episcopal status suggests that he may have been expected to work on converting the Anglo-Saxons. Arnold Angenendt, "The Conversion of the Anglo-Saxons Considered Against the Background of the Early Medieval Mission," *Settimane di studio del centro italiano di studi sull'alto medioevo* 32 (1986): 779–780.

⁴⁴ *Reg. ep.*, VI.51; Wood, "Mission of Augustine," 8–10.

was celebrated during this first indiction, it was reported that our brother and fellow-bishop baptized more than ten thousand English.⁴⁵

Even in the middle of June 601, he writes that he is full of joy "because the English race ... now trample[s] the idols [...] to which they were subject before with an insane fear" (*quod gens anglorum [...] iam calcat idola, quibus prius uesano timore subiacebat*).⁴⁶

In this context, the continued existence of pagan shrines represented a serious lapse, one that Gregory could not permit in a people otherwise progressing so well. Those who are only just beginning their advance are treated gently, but those who have already made some progress and begin to waver deserve harsher treatment. As Gregory remarks to Augustine: "For in these days the holy Church corrects some things with zeal, and tolerates some things with gentleness [...] for as the sin is in some measure to be tolerated in those who did it through ignorance, so it must be strenuously prosecuted in those who presume to sin knowingly" (*In hoc enim tempore sancta ecclesia quaedam per feruorem corrigit, quaedam per mansuetudinem tolerat, ... quia, sicut in his qui per ignorantiam fecerunt culpa aliquatenus toleranda est, ita in his fortiter insequenda, qui non metuunt sciendo peccare*).⁴⁷

Where Gregory seeks to forcefully curb pagan and Jewish influences in his earlier letters to England and in his other correspondence, he is "strenuously prosecuting" what he perceives as willful disobedience. But the shift in Gregory's approach we witness between the letters to Æthelbert and Mellitus suggests that he found cause to reconsider whether the English were really "sinning knowingly" by continuing the use of their pagan shrines. By the time he wrote to Mellitus, his optimism about the success of the mission had been tempered, and he writes as though dealing with a people not yet so advanced in spiritual matters as to merit stern rebuke. For an essentially pagan people only just beginning their ascent to God, a milder approach was more appropriate.

This shift in Gregory's estimation of the spiritual maturity of the English is also attested in his *Libellus responsionum*, a document that, like the letter to Mellitus, dates

⁴⁵ "...iam nunc de [Augustini] salute et opere ad nos scripta peruenerunt, quia tantis miraculis uel ipse uel hi qui cum eo transmissi sunt in [Anglorum] gente eadem coruscant, ut apostolorum uirtutes in signis quae exhibent imitari uideantur. In sollemnitate autem dominicae natiuitatis, quae hac prima indictione transacta est, plus quam decem milia angli ab eodem nuntiati sunt fratre et coepiscopo nostro baptizati." *Reg. ep.*, VIII.29; Martyn, *Letters*, 524.

⁴⁶ *Reg. ep.*, XI.36; Martyn, *Letters*, 779.

⁴⁷ *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ed. and trans. Bertram Colgrave and Roger Aubrey Baskerville Mynors, Oxford Medieval Texts (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), I.27, 84–87 (hereafter *Bede's Ecclesiastical History*).

to July 601.⁴⁸ This lengthy letter is a collection of Gregory's answers to questions put to him by Augustine, and its tone is remarkably consonant with that of the letter to Mellitus. Again and again, Gregory points to the biblical Law as an important source of insight for the Christian community in England, suggesting that Gregory imagines the Anglo-Saxon community as one that is, like the ancient Hebrews, halfway between paganism and mature Christianity.⁴⁹ The writing of this extended reply to questions arising from the mission field may even have been a catalyst for the change in Gregory's thinking about the English mission. His letter to Mellitus certainly suggests that he has spent some time thinking things over—"tell them what I have long pondered over, while thinking about the case of the English" (*dicite ei quid diu me cum de causa anglorum cogitans tractavi*)—and formulating his responses to Augustine would have given him occasion to do so.⁵⁰

Conclusion

Many scholars have pointed out the apparent tension between Gregory's instruction that Roman missionaries fuse and adapt pagan ritual and Jewish tradition into a Christian festival practice involving the construction of *tabernacula* (reminiscent of the Jewish Sukkot celebration) and feasting (with echoes of Germanic pagan sacrifice), and the harsher approach to mission advocated in other letters, both to insular and continental correspondents. Rather than suppose that Gregory would have preferred to use coercion in Anglo-Saxon England, but found it impossible, we can understand Gregory's softer approach as a reflection of his theological ideas about conversion and

⁴⁸ The text exists in three versions. One is included in *Bede's Ecclesiastical History*, I.27, another in *Gregorii I Papae registrum epistolarum: Libri VIII-XIV*, ed. L.M. Hartmann, Monumenta Germaniae Historica: Epistolae 2 (Berlin: Weidmann, 1899), XI.56a. Martyn, *Letters*, 532–545, provides an English translation of the latter. The text's authenticity has been defended by Henry Chadwick, "Gregory the Great and the Mission to the Anglo-Saxons," in *Gregorio magno e il suo tempo. XIX incontro di studiosi dell'antichità cristiana in collaborazione con l'École Française de Rome, Roma, 9-12 Maggio 1990*, vol. 1, Studia Ephemeridis "Augustinianum" 33 (Rome: Institutum Patristicum "Augustinianum," 1991), 199–212; Paul Meyvaert, "Bede's Text of the Libellus Responsionum of Gregory the Great to Augustine of Canterbury," in *England before the Conquest: Studies in Primary Sources Presented to Dorothy Whitelock*, ed. Peter Clemoes and Kathleen Hughes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), 15–33; Paul Meyvaert, "Le Libellus responsionum à Augustin de Cantorbéry: une oeuvre authentique de Saint Grégoire le Grand," in *Grégoire le Grand: actes de le Colloque international du Centre national de la recherche scientifique, Chantilly, Centre culturel Les Fontaines, 15-19 septembre 1982*, ed. Jacques Fontaine, Robert Gillet, and Stan Pellistrandi (Paris: Editions du Centre national de la recherche scientifique, 1986), 543–50.

⁴⁹ Bill Friesen, "Answers and Echoes: The Libellus Responsionum and the Hagiography of North-Western European Mission," *Early Medieval Europe* 14, no. 2 (2006): 164, argues that (Bede's version of) the *Libellus* suggests that at the time of writing the English still knew little or nothing about Christianity, and that Gregory's directions make more sense as a "concession to new converts, not lapsed church members."

⁵⁰ *Reg. ep.*, XI.56; Martyn, *Letters*, 802.

spiritual formation as a single, incremental and continuous process, in which progress is driven by divine *condescensio*. His exhortation that Æthelbert act forcefully against pagan remnants in his domain, on the other hand, flowed from a belief that the English had already made significant strides forward in their spiritual journey, and were now in danger of relapse into their old sins. Both letters can thus be understood from the perspective of Gregory's theology of spiritual progress and regress and his attendant ideas about pastoral practice. Gregory's change of heart in the summer of 601 suggests that he came to a new appreciation of just how far the English still had to come before they reached his Christian ideal. He concluded that this people was in need of a gradual introduction to Christianity, mirroring the slow revelation of God in providential history, and accommodations could be made accordingly. But, as his harsher statements remind us, Gregory considered the preservation of pagan ritual, and the infusion of Jewish elements into it, only a provisional measure. Development towards a fuller Christian spirituality and lifestyle was still expected to lead to the abandonment of such props, and convergence with the wider Christian tradition.⁵¹

⁵¹ I would like to thank Stichting De Hondert Gulden Reis for awarding me a travel grant towards the cost of attending the conference at which this paper was first presented.